DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 132 086 SO 009 623

TITLE	Marriage in West Africa--A Composite. Mini-Module.
INSTITUTION	African-American Inst., New York, N.Y. School Services Div.
PUB DATE	[76]
NOTE	7p.
AVAILABLE FROM	African-American Institute, 833 United Nations Plaza, New York, New York 10017 ($0.50, 4 for $1.50)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	African American Studies; *African Culture; *Area Studies; Bibliographies; Comparative Analysis; Cross Cultural Studies; *Cultural Education; Discussion (Teaching Technique); Learning Activities; Learning Modules; Lesson Plans; Life Style; *Marriage; Secondary Education; Social Behavior; Social Studies; *Sociocultural Patterns
IDENTIFIERS	Africa

ABSTRACT

This module contains a description of the responsibilities and ceremony of marriage in west Africa, seven discussion questions exploring the differences between Western and African marriage customs, five enrichment activities, and a bibliography of five books about love and marriage in Africa. The general discussion relates the engagement of a young African couple, stressing the obligations each person has to the other, their families, and the community. The wedding ceremony is described in detail, with a diagram of seating and a list of symbolic ingredients of the marriage ceremony such as the coconut, the milk of life. A brief explanation follows which points out that, for Africans, marriage with its promise of children is a link for the dead with those yet to live. The questions and enrichment activities encourage students to compare African marriage customs with ceremonies of various Western religious groups and to consider if traditional African marriages will survive, in light of the pull of modern life against ties to the past. The bibliography contains stories as well as general studies of African marriage customs. (AV)

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MARRIAGE IN WEST AFRICA - A COMPOSITE

There is great excitement in the Traoré home - their daughter Shadé has received a marriage proposal from Adilifu, the eldest son of the Seka family. This has been expected for some time now for the families had made an appointment to meet about three months ago - a definite signal that the two families were about to merge.

Shadé and Adilifu had talked about their approaching marriage often and had decided that they wanted a traditional wedding ceremony because of the significance attached to it. The elders in the family were consulted for the correct procedure to follow during the ceremony.

In keeping with the traditional ceremonial procedure, there will be days when the happy couple will not be able to see each other. However, Shadé and Adilifu know that this time will be spent in final instructions on the proper behavior of a man and a woman towards one another and especially towards their families and the community.

Shadé will acquire the necessary equipment for the proper running of a household. Every member of the family will contribute something. By the time her wedding day arrives, there will be enough food to feed the many invited guests for the entire day. The groom-to-be would have presented Shadé's family with a gift of money, a part of which is for Shadé to do with as she pleases. The balance will be used by her family to help lighten the financial strain the family is experiencing during this time.

Shadé has learned from early childhood what her role will be as a future wife and mother. In many senses the initiation school put it all together. She knows that she is expected to protect the mores and traditions of her people and to be a bridge between her own family and Adilifu's. Through her the potential of a new family exists.

Adilifu's education has not been neglected during his formative years either. He, too, finalized the transition from boy to man in the initiation school. When he asked Shadé to marry him, he knew that he was saying, "I will take care of you, and aid in the financial growth of the new family we are creating. I accept my responsibility to our community, for in return the community will offer us its strength during our marriage."

CEREMONY

In the center of an oval "circle" with an opening at one end, place one long table.* In front of the table place two chairs. Off to the right of the center table and chairs, place the other tables and chairs -- enough to accommodate the immediate members of both families. The guests can form a group within the larger circle preferably in front of the two chairs. At the start of the ceremony, the drummers and dancers precede the families of the bride and groom to the wedding circle. They will begin to play and sing softly while the families are seating themselves at their table (the rest of the community is already seated or standing around the circle).

The most important participant in the ceremony enters - the conductor, who is usually the eldest in the bride's family, with a helper or two. After he enters, the bride and groom enter and take their seats in front of the community and their families. While the conductor speaks to the community and the families about the mutual responsibility of the bride and groom towards each other and the community, the conductor's helper is sprinkling water on the ground. The sprinkling of water is to "wash" away the bride's complete loyality to her own family.

Behind the bride and groom, there is a table laden with all kinds of fresh fruits and the "ingredients of the marriage ceremony". The conductor takes each ingredient in turn, advising the community of its significance. He tastes it first before presenting it to each member of the immediate family to taste. After the family has tasted the ingredients, the groom receives it, tastes it, then gives it to his bride for the final taste.

During this ceremony, the drummers and dancers/singers are constantly performing in a low-key way.

Finally, the maid of honor takes some soap and washes and dries the feet of the bride, thereby symbolically giving her to the groom's family. The groom accepts the bride by picking her up in his arms and presenting her to the families and community assembled, carrying her to his home (in through a door). The bride and groom return to the circle with the bride joyously dancing by herself. The community stuffs envelopes of money down the front of her bodice or affixes it to her perspiring forehead. Her husband now shares in this dance of happiness with the community joining in about five or ten minutes later. Of course, there is plenty to eat and drink.

*See attached diagram

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INGREDIENTS

Coconut - the milk of life

Palm oil - the joy of life

Water - the sustainer of life

Bitter kola - after the bitter anything will seem better

Salt - the flavor of life

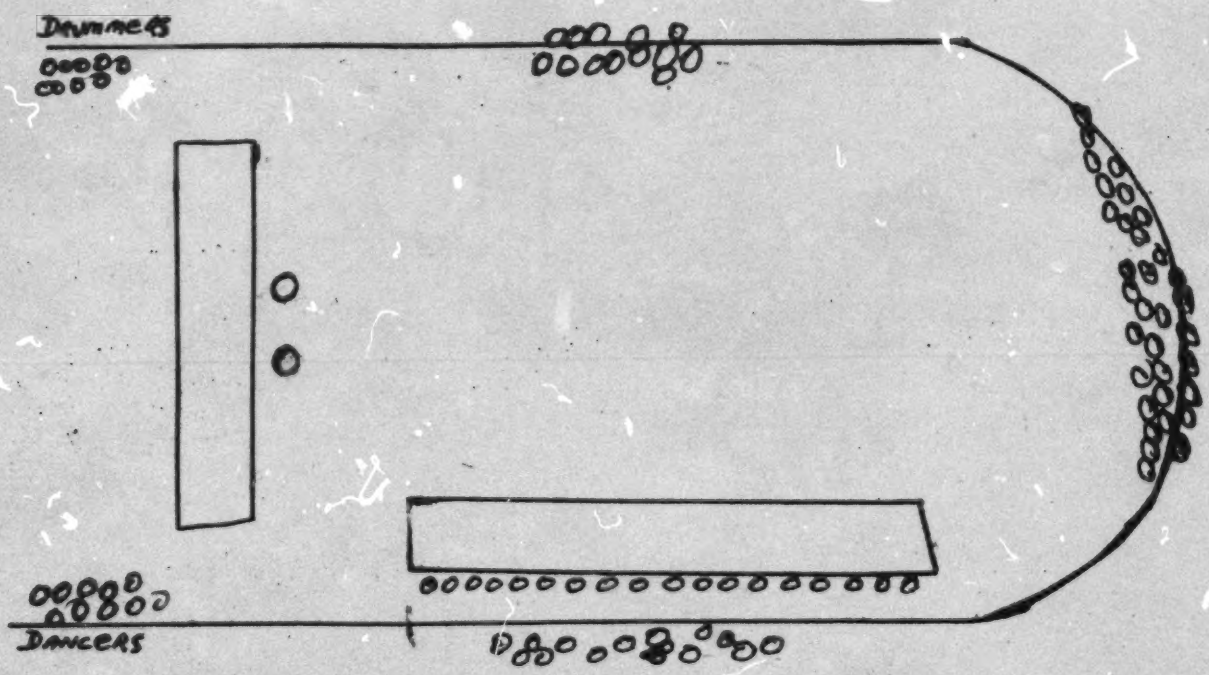
Honey - the sweetness of life

Pepper pod - seeds too numerous to count - may the seeds of this couple be the same

Plates or horn of fruits

Soap, towel, two chairs, two long tables and additional chairs for immediate family.

Whiskey - (if the family partakes of alcohol)



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- LESSON PLAN -

WILL TRADITIONAL AFRICAN MARRIAGES SURVIVE?

Marriage is a universal institution the world over. In Africa marriage is especially important because it symbolizes the chain of immortality - the link of the dead with those yet to live.

Though there are many different peoples in Africa, it is generally true that traditional African societies are community oriented rather than individual oriented. Marriage is more a union of two families than of two individuals and it is an adventure in which the entire community participates and shares.

Marriage and children are inextricably linked. The children which marriage produces are mirror images of self and ancestors. Those who have died previously are now reborn. The possibility of the continuation of life is guaranteed. Thus marriage is an obligation within African societies. The rejection of this obligation is, simultaneously, a rejection of self, of past and future.

Increasingly young Africans are exerting more influence in the choice of a future mate. Pre-arranged marriage is on the decline. The custom of presenting gifts to the future bride's family persists. It symbolizes the gratitude of both groom and his family to the bride's family for their years of care and permission and support for the new union. It seals the marriage contract.

Polygamy, perhaps the most misunderstood of African institutions, reflects the pride and joy in children and the belief that a father with many children is the most wealthy of all men. Maturity is closely linked with fatherhood and one's children enrich the productivity of the society.

Divorce sometimes happens. Courtship, marriage, children are part of the inexorable process of life everywhere. So, too, in Africa.

1. How is this ceremony similar to ceremonies you have seen?

- In Christian and traditional African ceremonies, the two families sit separately;
- Carrying the bride over the threshhold;
- Catholics and Africans both taste ingredients; i.e. "ritual" of eating together; commemoration of Last Supper;
- Minister acts as elder in conducting ceremony;
- Feeding each other wedding cake;
- Table of honor at Reception;
- Receiving gifts - Bridal shower.

How is it different?	- The absence of exchange of vows in African ceremony; - African ceremony has no best man; - Bride is kissed in some Western ceremonies; - Africans combine ceremony and reception. Each is separate in the West.
	*
2. What does this marriage ceremony do for the bride and groom?	- Legalizes their union in the eyes of the family, community and country; - Public demonstration of their commitment to each other.
	*
3. Why is the community involved?	- Witnesses to marriage; - tradition that it is a social act.
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4. Why did Shadé and Adilifu select a traditional rather than the Western marriage?	- Because of the active participation of family and community in ceremony; - Circle a sense of unity; - Demonstrates important role of elders in traditional society, important role of tradition; - Ceremony would please parents, etc.
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5. What might you want changed in our wedding ceremony?	- "I now pronounce you '<u>man</u> and wife' instead of '<u>husband</u> and wife'"; - The substance of the vows, i.e. the promise to <u>obey</u>; pledge of eternity; the idea "giving" the woman only.
	*
Their ceremony?	- That the groom's feet should be washed; - Would want spoken vows; - Shorten the ceremony.
	*
7. Will traditional African marriages survive?	- Yes, because the ties to the past are so strong; - No, because the pull of modern life is gradually undermining traditional African life.
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Enrichment:

1. Explore the procedures used in a Catholic ceremony when one of the participants is not a Catholic.

2. Compare a Jewish ceremony with a traditional African ceremony.

3. Do research on the evolution of the Protestant ceremony.

4. Read Wole Soyinka The Lion and The Jewel, Oxford University Press, 1963 and write and dramatize the marriage ceremony which could occur.

5. Compare a Western style wedding in Africa with a Western style wedding in the U.S.

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